[Robert Spillane, “The Mind and Mental Illness: a Tale of Two Myths,” *The Skeptic*, 2006, 26, 4, 46-50. This paper forms the basis of a talk given by Prof Spillane to a NSW Skeptics Dinner Meeting during 2006.]

My aim in this paper is to ask if there is such a thing as a mind, and to argue that there is not. If there is no such thing as a mind, then there can be no illnesses of the mind, and so no mental illness. If there is no mental illness, there is no mental health either.

The view that the mind and mental illness are myths is neither new nor rare. The case against the mind and mental illness has been argued by behaviourists, nominalists, positivists and existentialists. Despite these critiques, the ideas of the mind and mental illness continue to have a strong hold on the public imagination. Mental health professionals and government publications even criticise sectors of the community for their confusion about the ‘facts’ of mental illness. My argument is that there are no facts about mental illness except that it is a myth, based on the myth of the mind, or ‘the ghost in the machine’.

Inventing the mind

The mind was not discovered, it was invented. The story of the invention of the mind begins with Homer (about 800 BC) whose language in *The Iliad* is dominated by verbs, adjectives and adverbs. This is because in Homer’s heroic society a man is what he does — he is the sum of his actions and there is no actor pulling the strings of action, as it were. Homer makes no distinction between actor and action in the same way in which we should make no distinction between flash and lightning (since the flash is the lightning.) Homer’s characters act because their roles demand it — there are no hidden depths, no unconscious motives, no personality traits, no hierarchy of psychological needs. Homer has no conception of soul, mind or psyche — and so no psychology or psychosomatic (mind/body) processes. For Homer psyche means ‘breath’ and soma means ‘corpse’, so ‘psychosomatic’ in Homeric Greek means breath/corpse interaction — an absurdity.

Homer had no mental language. He relies on external factors to account for human action and interpreted the ‘irrational’ elements in human nature as an interference by the gods with human life. We must not suppose, however, that these alien sources are spiritual. Neither Homer nor any other early Greek writer had a concept of ‘spiritual’. Psyche is not spiritual but is composed of material which resides in the body while the person is alive, and at death flies down to Hades through a bodily orifice. From there it may be summoned to address the living. The only recorded function of psyche for living people is to leave them at death. Psyche had, for Homer, no mental function in the living person: it is simply that whose existence ensures that the person is alive. Lacking the linguistic framework to distinguish between a ‘psychological’ function and a bodily organ meant that psyche was felt as a surge of power from within.

Homeric characters dream because gods put something into to them, they act angrily because they are bothered by the external ‘angers’, they are afraid of the enemy because they lack menos in their bodies. Warriors fill their breasts with fury, Achilles fills the thymos in his breast with power. In this way the Homeric Greeks attributed behaviour to (external) roles and (internal) bodily organs — a biosocial, not a psychosocial, perspective. We continue this tradition when we say: “He has a job but his ‘heart’ is not in it, and he lacks the ‘brains’ to succeed and the ‘guts’ to resign.”

Homer’s belief that human action is initiated through the body by the gods was to suffer a serious setback to his followers when, in the 6th Century BC, 54 of his 55 gods were retrenched. The ancient Greeks then needed a different way of explaining human action, especially those actions that violated social norms. With the removal of the gods from Mt Olympus, Homeric ‘psychology’ had to change radically. The obvious solution to the problem was to reverse causes — human action is not externally caused, it is internally caused. This

led, in the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers, to the view that human action is caused by psyche, which is that element of a living creature which distinguishes it from a dead one. Psyche is, therefore, life. But Plato notoriously opposed the psyche to the soma. He argued that since the soma is mortal, the psyche must be immortal. He has Socrates say that a true philosopher should turn away from his soma and devote himself to his immortal psyche. Accordingly, the lover of truth will turn away from this world and pursue ultimate truth in the spiritual world through his psyche alone. Just how this is accomplished is never explained. I am reminded of Frank Ramsey's quip: "What you can't say, you can't say, and you can't whistle it either." Plato was, I believe, whistling what he couldn't say and so set the agenda for spiritualists down the ages whose whistling became ever more fantastic.

The first great transformation in Western thinking is, then, a movement from Homer to Plato, from one world to two. Something must have been in the air in the 6th Century BC because this is when the Buddha in India, Zoroaster (Zarathustra) in Persia and Isaiah in Palestine preached a philosophy of two worlds. After the 6th Century philosophers and dramatists promoted the 'two world view' — a physical world infected by sense-defeating illusions and the metaphysical world accessible to the 'psyche'. They argued that since the physical world of the body is illusory, the metaphysical world of the psyche is 'real'. The key to unlocking the secrets of the metaphysical world is the psyche which is extolled in proportion as the body is indicted. The mind is set to triumph over the body.

Homer describes the world in human terms: he does not concern himself with a spiritual world or a mysterious inner world of mental events. Plato spiritualised Homer's naturalistic way of thinking (which explains why he wanted the Iliad banned from his Republic). From Homer we have taken the view that human action is caused by bodily organs, notably the brain. From Plato we have taken the view that the essence of the human body is the psyche, rendered in English as 'soul' or 'mind'.

Cartesian dualism

Descartes (1596-1650) is known as the father of modern philosophy because he wrestled with the question: is there a place in a scientific, mechanical world for faith and freedom? His importance rests on the fact that he faced the dilemma introduced to European philosophy by the conflict of scientific thought with the religious worldview. He was himself a devout Catholic and was unwilling to relinquish belief in the soul, while being an incisive thinker in the scientific mode.

His belief in the soul was not based on respect for the authority of the Church nor on respect for the wisdom of the ancients. But he did accept the existence of innate ideas such as those of God, time, space, substance, motion and the fundamental geometrical axioms, holding that these are not implanted by experience but held with a certainty that must be accounted for. On this basis he was prepared to seek proofs for the existence of the soul. On the other side, he held without reservation the scientific viewpoint and its leanings towards materialism. So he held the central tenets of both the religious and scientific worldviews to be substantially true, and devoted his thinking life to reconciling them.

Descartes proposed that the body is a machine and that its physiology can be explained according to the principles of physics. It is composed of matter, which is extended substance. This doctrine opened the way for the scientific approach to physiology, especially through the study of animals by vivisection – because animals had no souls according to theology and were, in Christian terms, simply automata. The soul, on the other hand, is unitary, unextended and free. It knows the perceptions which arise in the body. It wills actions but once having done so, the body runs them off mechanically. The soul therefore interacts with the body and Descartes proposed the pineal gland as the point of this interaction. This imaginative bit of fiction actually served very well to separate the soul from the rest of the body, leaving the matter to be viewed as a perfectly mechanical contrivance on which the freedom of the soul did not intrude.

This doctrine that soul and body are two quite different kinds of entity which interact only in certain special ways is known as Cartesian Dualism. It should be emphasised that Descartes was not a religious heretic. He was not abolishing the soul. What he did with his doctrine was to present the philosophical world with a problem which as been with it ever since, and bring into relief a kind of duality which pervades life at all times. On the one hand there is the material world in which we live and the physical body which we must maintain by physical means; on the other hand is the conviction held by many people that they are something more than flesh, bone and nerves. For Descartes the soul must be what is left after the body has been abstracted; for materialists there is nothing left.

So far as the existence of the soul is concerned, Descartes' proofs are summed up in the famous saying: "*Cogito ergo sum*" – "I am thinking therefore I exist." He arrived at this conclusion after resolving, in the Discourse on Method, to accept nothing as true which he did not clearly recognise to be so: to accept nothing in his judgements beyond what presented itself clearly and distinctly to him, so that he should have no occasion to doubt it. Applying his method of Cartesian Doubt – to seek for an internal truth after he has systematically doubted everything, including his body – he concluded that he could not doubt that he is doubting, and since doubting is a form of thinking, he must exist because he is thinking. He then asks the obvious question: "What is this thing which doubts?"

Descartes concludes that he is a soul (a thinking 'thing' that doubts, understands, asserts, denies, wills, feels and imagines), and he has a body contingently attached to the soul. But how does he get the soul into the body? By assigning it the function of thinking. In The Passions of the Soul he lays it down that the soul exercises its functions in a small part of the brain. Now when the body dies, the brain obviously perishes also but, Descartes maintains, the soul as a "substance closely joined to the brain" is immortal and survives the death of the body. So Descartes completes his mission, which is to locate the soul in the brain. From soul to mind The modern concept of 'mind' as an immaterial 'thing' – separate from the body yet in communication with it – is attributed to Descartes. Although this view is widely accepted today, libertarian psychiatrist Thomas Szasz has argued that it is false, the product of a mistranslation. There is no French (or German) noun corresponding to the English 'mind'. Yet translators have employed 'mind' when Descartes used the French word for soul. In *The Meaning of Mind* Szasz argues, rightly in my view, that it is a mistake to blame Descartes for the division of the human being into body and mind and to name this dichotomy 'Cartesian'. Instead, it would be more accurate to view him as a pioneer neuromythologist, in that he claimed to have discovered evidence for locating the soul inside the cranium.

Szasz points out that today 'mind' functions as both noun and verb. Yet it was not always so. Before the 16th Century people had souls, not minds. 'Mind' meant only minding (as in 'mind the step'). As a noun, the (scientific) mind resembles the (religious) soul, although it is less likely to be granted the ability to survive bodily death. Mind – from the Latin mens which meant intention or will – is not a thing (material or immaterial) but is an activity which is reflected in its status as a verb. Much confusion has resulted from the unfortunate tendency to turn verbs into abstract nouns, and then treat the abstractions as if they are concrete nouns. If mind is not an entity 'it' cannot be in the brain or in any other part of the body. And there can be nothing 'in' the mind, such as thoughts, feelings, wishes, memories. We can conclude, therefore, that we have no minds even though we mind; how and what we mind is who we are.

Because there is no observable entity called 'the mind' we identify the concept in terms of activities which we attribute to it, notably thinking. The ancients believed that thinking is talking to oneself. So Socrates says: "I describe thinking as discourse – as a statement pronounced not aloud but silently to oneself." Mind is not brain, or psyche, but a person's ability to have a conversation with himself. Petrarch (1304-1374) wrote: "The written, spoken, contemplative word is the true medicine for self-healing." Montaigne (1533-1592) wrote: "We

have a mind capable of turning in on itself; it can keep itself company. It talks to itself." And Vico (1668-1744): "The mind is the total of what a person does and says." According to these philosophers, mind(edness) is a moral and psychological concept and not a 'thing' to be studied by biologists, neuroscientists, psychiatrists and cognitive psychologists.

Minding is, therefore, the ability to attend and adapt to one's surroundings by using language to communicate with others and with oneself. Because we attribute this ability only to intelligent beings, minding implies moral agency which we attribute to some, but not all, persons. We do not attribute the ability to mind to children or demented folk because they cannot communicate by language. To be recognised as minded is to be acknowledged as a moral agent, an individual who is willing and able to function as a responsible member of society. And this assumes a capacity to mind which we identify with the capacity to think, which is the ability to talk and listen to oneself. There is an obvious connection, then, between mindedness and language and since reason is a function of both, so too is unreason.

Descartes gives to physiology a charter to study the body as a physico-chemical machine, to psychology a basis for continuing to believe in the existence of the soul (now thought of as a mind), to philosophy the problem of mind/body interaction, and to psychiatry the problem of dealing with illnesses of the mind – 'mental illnesses'.

The myth of mental illness

If there is no such thing as a mind, there can be no illnesses of the mind. The notions of 'mental health' and 'mental illness' are, therefore, profoundly problematic. The problematic nature of mental illness has been revealed in two ways: (a) by critical analysis of its logical status; and (b) by critical analysis of its empirical status. The logical status of mental illness is problematic because illness affects only the body and since the mind is not a bodily organ, it follows that the mind cannot be ill. Mental illness is, therefore, an oxymoron. Since logical impossibility entails empirical impossibility the debate should end here. But a feature of the mental illness literature is its startling insensitivity to language and logic. The most obvious example is the popular view that illnesses of the 'mind' are, in fact, illnesses of the brain. If so, they are bodily illnesses and not mental illnesses and the category 'mental illness' is self-contradictory and redundant. Either way, mental illness is a myth.

The empirical status of mental illness is problematic because the authors of *DSM IV TR* admit that "no definition adequately specifies precise boundaries for the concept of 'mental disorder'." They add: "Although this volume is titled *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* the term 'mental disorder' unfortunately implies a distinction between 'mental' and 'physical' disorders that is a reductionistic anachronism of mind/body dualism." And so it is. But the authors then embrace this dualism when they assert: "A compelling literature documents that there is much 'physical' in 'mental' disorders and much 'mental' in 'physical' disorders. Had they been logical in their reasoning they would have concluded that there are bodily illnesses and there are (mis)behaviours (misleadingly called 'mental disorders'). They could then have dispensed with 'mind' and 'mental' entirely. But this would raise embarrassing questions about why we call misbehaviours illnesses that require medical treatment.

Misbehaviours are called 'mental disorders' even though there are no objective, medical tests by which they can be diagnosed. Diagnoses of 'mental disorder' are, therefore, putative, i.e. they are not real diagnoses. And so we encounter in *DSM IV* such 'mental disorders' as: academic disorder, binge-eating disorder, disruptive behaviour disorder, expressive language disorder, gender-identity disorder, mathematics disorder, phase of life disorder, rumination disorder, written expression disorder, and many more examples of the medicalisation of moral problems in living. Faced with illogicalities, lack of empirical evidence and linguistic confusion, the *National Mental Health Strategy* (NMHS) website claims: "Mental health is about balance (sic) in our thoughts, feelings, behaviour and relationships with others." Who determines 'balance' and on what criteria? It should be obvious that 'thoughts and feelings' cannot be

studied objectively – they are inferences from behaviour, generally communications, and often complaints. 'Thoughts' and 'feelings' are abstract nouns which are reified as concrete nouns. People do not have 'thoughts' and 'feelings' like they have colds; they communicate their thinking and their feelings to others. Diagnoses are based on these communications and since their evaluation is based on some moral code, diagnoses of mental illnesses are based also on that moral code. In short, bodily illnesses are diagnosed on objective medical criteria; mental illnesses are diagnosed on subjective moral criteria.

Following the publication of Virchow's book, *Cellular Pathology* in 1858, the standard scientific measure of illness became bodily lesion, objectively identifiable by anatomical, histological or other physico-chemical observation or measurement. Yet the NMHS website, which purports to inform the public of "the myths, misunderstandings and facts about mental illness", asserts:

(a) mental illnesses "are just like any other: heart disease, diabetes, asthma." This is patently false since they are not, and cannot be, diagnosed on the basis of objective signs. If they were diagnosed objectively, they would be bodily illnesses. People do not catch a mental illness, they do not pass a mental illness to another, they do not have inoculations against a mental illness, autopsies do not identify a mental illness.

(b) "The causes of mental illness are unclear." True, if there is no mental illness there is no cause of that illness. Yet it is frequently and incorrectly asserted that schizophrenia, for example, is due to chemical imbalances in the brain. Exactly which chemical is the culprit is rarely stated although there are many candidates which fall in and out of favour as the fashions change. For many years it was dopamine (now totally discredited) while others compete for supremacy.

(c) "A predisposition to some mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, can run in families." True again, but speaking English also runs in families.

(d) "Many other factors can contribute to the onset of mental illness in people with a predisposition such as stress, bereavement, relationship breakdown, child abuse, unemployment, social isolation and times of accidents and life-threatening illness." No one would deny the suffering that such problems cause people, but does such suffering qualify them as candidates for an illness and associated medical treatments? Many people with such problems suffer from social, economic and moral problems and they should be treated as moral agents, not as medical patients. It is also an historical fact that many of those labelled 'mentally ill' deny they are ill, do not want to be in the presence of doctors and refuse medication. These refusals are often used as further 'evidence' of their mental illness.

(e) "Research has shown that most people cannot correctly recognise mental disorders" (but mental health professionals can?) "and do not understand the meaning of psychiatric terms." But this may reflect genuine and well-meaning concern about the pretensions of psychiatry and the base rhetoric it employs to stigmatise people whose behaviour annoys or offends others.

(f) "Because those with a mental illness can experience disruption of their normal thoughts and feelings, their behaviour may seem odd, annoying or unpredictable." How do the authors of such tendentious assertions evaluate 'disruption of normal thoughts and feelings'? Furthermore, the authors do not canvas the possibility that the odd, annoying or unpredictable behaviour is frequently the 'basis' for the diagnosis of mental illness.

In *The Myth of Mental Illness* Thomas Szasz argues that mental illness is a metaphor: minds can be sick only in the way that jokes can be sick. It follows that mental illness is not something people have, but is something they do or say. Szasz concludes that "mental illness is a myth whose function is to disguise and thus render more palatable the bitter pill of moral conflicts in human relations." On Szasz's view madness is a form of mutiny, insanity a kind of insubordination. He believes that the metaphors of mental illness function as euphemisms for

moral problems in living, as excuses for crime and misbehaviour, as stigmata for invalidating adversaries and as medico-legal fictions. When obesity, gambling, self-starvation, murder and drug-taking are called illnesses alongside diabetes, tuberculosis and syphilis, the category 'illness' becomes perfectly elastic, accommodating virtually anything one wants to place in it, including metaphorical illnesses. To logically minded folk this is merely amusing but it becomes especially serious when children are drawn into this net of semantic confusions and base rhetoric. A worrying example is the invention of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) which was voted into existence by a show of hands at a 1987 meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. Six million American children are being forced to take a cocaine-like drug for this 'mental disorder'. The mass drugging of children — a crime against humanity — has spread around the world.

The myth of the mind generated the myth of mental illness, in which there is a certain irony. The mind was to be the source of human freedom and responsibility. Mental illness is the source of unfreedom and non-responsibility. The mind is a metaphor and mental illness is metaphorical illness which we literalise at our peril. If moral problems are re-defined as mental illnesses, notions of right and wrong, freedom and responsibility are replaced by notions of healthy and sick, unfreedom and non-responsibility. The progressive medicalisation of moral behaviour (which is a conspicuous feature of life in the 21st Century) produces a society in which individuals are labelled as victims of their brain chemistry, not as moral agents. A consequence of these efforts is the undermining of the notions of personal responsibility. A mind/brain cannot be held responsible for murder.

Conclusion

I conclude with brief answers to the questions presented for discussion at the conference — Mind and its Potential.

Q: Is mind merely a product of the body, a random act of nature?

A: There is no such thing as a mind. We are minded because we can speak to ourselves.

Q: Is mind the product of a creator god, an intelligent designer?

A: There is no empirical evidence for an intelligent designer.

Q: Does mind come from a previous mind, i.e. reincarnation?

A: There are no (previous) minds. And reincarnation is another myth.

Q: What are the logical arguments for and against mind?

A: I have rehearsed the main philosophical arguments above. Valid logical arguments do not entail empirical truth. The logical arguments for the existence of mind are only as strong as their premises, which are dubious. There is no empirical evidence for mind (or for mental illness either).

Q: Will it ever be possible for science to prove which is correct or is it just a matter of faith?

A: If science could prove the existence of mind, it would not be mind – it would be a body structure or process. The mind is a secular version of the soul and is a matter of faith, ie, a belief with no empirical support.

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